



Preliminary Decision Memo

2021 Whitebark Pine Restoration

USDA Forest Service
Crescent Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest
Klamath County, Oregon

Background

The Crescent Ranger District is considering planting a 960-acre area with blister rust resistant whitebark pine along the FS5840 road adjacent to the Crescent District's southern boundary with the Fremont-Winema National Forests. This is an area that currently has and will support this unique species of conifer, which is Federally listed as Proposed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). It is the most ecologically appropriate species for that area and would help develop this area into future late and old structure forest. These seedlings will be planted by hand utilizing a hoedad (planting shovel).

Purpose and Need

Due to the continuing decline of whitebark pine across its range, there is a need to planting blister rust resistant seedlings as has been recommended in the Whitebark Restoration Strategy for the Pacific Northwest. Such restoration plantings are needed to maintain viable, genetically diverse populations of whitebark pine where it is currently present.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes the following actions to meet this purpose and need:

Plant approximately 1,500 seedlings of blister rust resistant whitebark pine over 960 acres. These seedlings will be planted by hand utilizing hoedads (planting shovels) with a small crew of seven people in the fall of 2021.

The project is located in Klamath County, Oregon, with a legal description of is T. 26S, R 07E, S. 31, 32, 33, and 34, Willamette Meridian (Figure 1).

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories listed in 36 CFR 220.6(e), and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

Category of Exclusion

The appropriate category of exclusion is found in the Forest Service National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(5). This category is appropriate because the project involves “regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation that does not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion.”

Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

In determining the appropriateness of using the categorical exclusion, a determination of the potential impact to the resource conditions identified in FSH 1909.15 Section 30.3(2) must be made. The following is the list of the potential effects to the resource conditions from the project activities.

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

- Wildlife: It is anticipated that this project would have “No Effect” to any threatened or endangered species and “No Impact” to any R6 Sensitive wildlife species. A Biological Evaluation (BE) would be completed before issuance of a final Decision Memo to document any potential effects, and any design criteria or mitigation measures will be added to that decision.
- Plants: It is anticipated that this project would have “No Effect” to any threatened, endangered, and “No Impact” R6 Sensitive plant species. A Biological Evaluation (BE) would be completed before issuance of a final Decision Memo to document any potential effects, and any design criteria or mitigation measures will be added to that decision.
- Fisheries: It is anticipated that this project would have “No Effect” to any threatened, endangered, or R6 Sensitive fish species. If needed a Biological Evaluation (BE) would be completed before issuance of a final Decision Memo to document any potential effects, and any design criteria or mitigation measures will be added to that decision.

2. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds

Executive Order 11988 provides direction to avoid adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Executive Order 11990 provides direction to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands. The project is consistent with both executive orders.

- This project would have no effect to either floodplains or wetlands.
- There would be no adverse effects to a municipal watershed because the project is not located within or adjacent to a municipal watershed.

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas

The project area is not located within any Wilderness Study Areas or National Recreation Areas. Approximately 75 acres overlaps the Mt Thielsen Wilderness. Restoration planting is consistent with the Deschutes Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP 4-107) for Wilderness -Management Area M6. Specifically M6-34 ‘*Only native species will be used for site regeneration*’ And M6-36 ‘*Revegetation work should be achieved in a manner that best meets the needs of an individual site... rest, seedbed preparation, planting (use only native species).*’ LRMP Appendix 4-11.

The project is approximately one mile from the edge of the Little Deschutes Wild and Scenic River (WSR) corridor. No activity would take place in the WSR corridor.

Restoration planting overlaps approximately 168 acres of the Oregon Cascades National Recreation Area (OCRA). This is consistent with the OCRA Overall Direction #3...” maintain the natural scenic characteristics” (LRMP Appendix 4-31). In Appendix 4-43 under *Timber* it allows for “restoration of such an area will be designed to return it to a natural state.” This is an area that supports this unique species of conifer, which is Federally listed as Proposed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The planting of the blister rust resistant whitebark pine in this area as not only the most ecologically appropriate species but also to help develop into future late and old structure forest.

4. *Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas*

The project is not located within any Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA) or potential wilderness areas. The nearest Inventoried Roadless Area is the Mt Thielsen IRA, which is approximately 15 miles to the southwest of the project area.

The project is not within a potential wilderness area, nor will it affect any of the criteria for inventorying potential wilderness (ie. – no roads will be built and no timber will be cut).

5. *Research Natural Areas*

There are no existing or proposed Research Natural Areas in or adjacent to the project. The nearest Research Natural Area is the Cannon RNA on the Fremont-Winema National Forests, which is approximately 15 miles to the east.

6. *American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas*

Consultation for this project would be covered under the 2003 Programmatic Agreement for the State of Oregon and a final determination of compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, including any required field surveys, would be completed before issuance of a final decision memo.

Based on the final conclusions regarding the effects to the resources and conditions listed above, I will determine if the project will have no extraordinary circumstances that may result in a significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

Consistency with Deschutes Land and Resource Management Plan

This project would be consistent with direction found in the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan. Biological Evaluations are being prepared for Sensitive, Threatened, and Endangered animal and plant species and will be located in the project file at the Crescent Ranger District. Also, the project will meet all of the applicable Project Design Criteria from the 2014 Programmatic Biological Assessment for central Oregon.

Public Involvement

Public scoping and Tribal consultation are being conducted in conjunction with the release of this preliminary Decision Memo.

Implementation

When the Decision Memo is signed, project implementation can begin once final approval is received from the Crescent District Special Use Administrator. The following project design features will be included to meet project objectives and/or to reduce or minimize unwanted effects:

Cultural

- For any ground disturbance work- if imported fill is utilized it must be from a culturally sterile source (meaning there is no possible contamination from fill originating from another buried archaeological site).
- If, prior to, or during construction work, items of archeological or historical value are reported or discovered, or an unknown deposit of such items is disturbed, the permit holder would immediately cease activities in the area affected. The Forest Service would be notified and ground disturbing activity would not resume until written authorization is provided.



Botany

- All work will be done utilizing a hoedad (planting shovel).

Best Available Science and Conclusion

My conclusion will include a review of the record of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

How to Comment and Timeframe

Your comments about the proposed actions or other concerns are welcome and would be considered in the decision. They would be most helpful if received by September 12, 2021. Comments can be submitted to the address on the header of this letter, or by email to: comments-pacificnorthwest-deschutes-crescent@usda.gov. Written or oral scoping comments should include your name, address, and telephone number (if available). Include the title of the project (2021 Whitebark Pine Restoration Project).

This notice also serves as an invitation to participate in the Forest's National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 process for the project.

Administrative and Appeal Rights

The final decision is not subject to appeal or objection. On January 17, 2014, the President signed into law the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-76). Section 431 of that Act directs that the 1992 and 2012 legislation establishing the 36 CFR 215 (post-decisional appeals) and 36 CFR 218 (pre-decisional objections) processes "shall not apply to any project or activity implementing a land and resource management plan ... that is categorically excluded ... under the National Environmental Policy Act [NEPA]." As a result, the Forest Service no longer offers notice, comment, and appeal opportunities pursuant to 36 CFR 215 for categorically excluded projects such as the one covered under this Decision Memo.

Contact Information

For additional information concerning this project, contact Christina Veverka, District Botanist, at Crescent Ranger District, 136471 Hwy 97 N/ P.O. Box 208, Crescent OR 97733, by phone at (541) 433-3200 or email christina.veverka@usda.gov

Responsible Official

The Responsible Official will be the District Ranger, Crescent Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest.

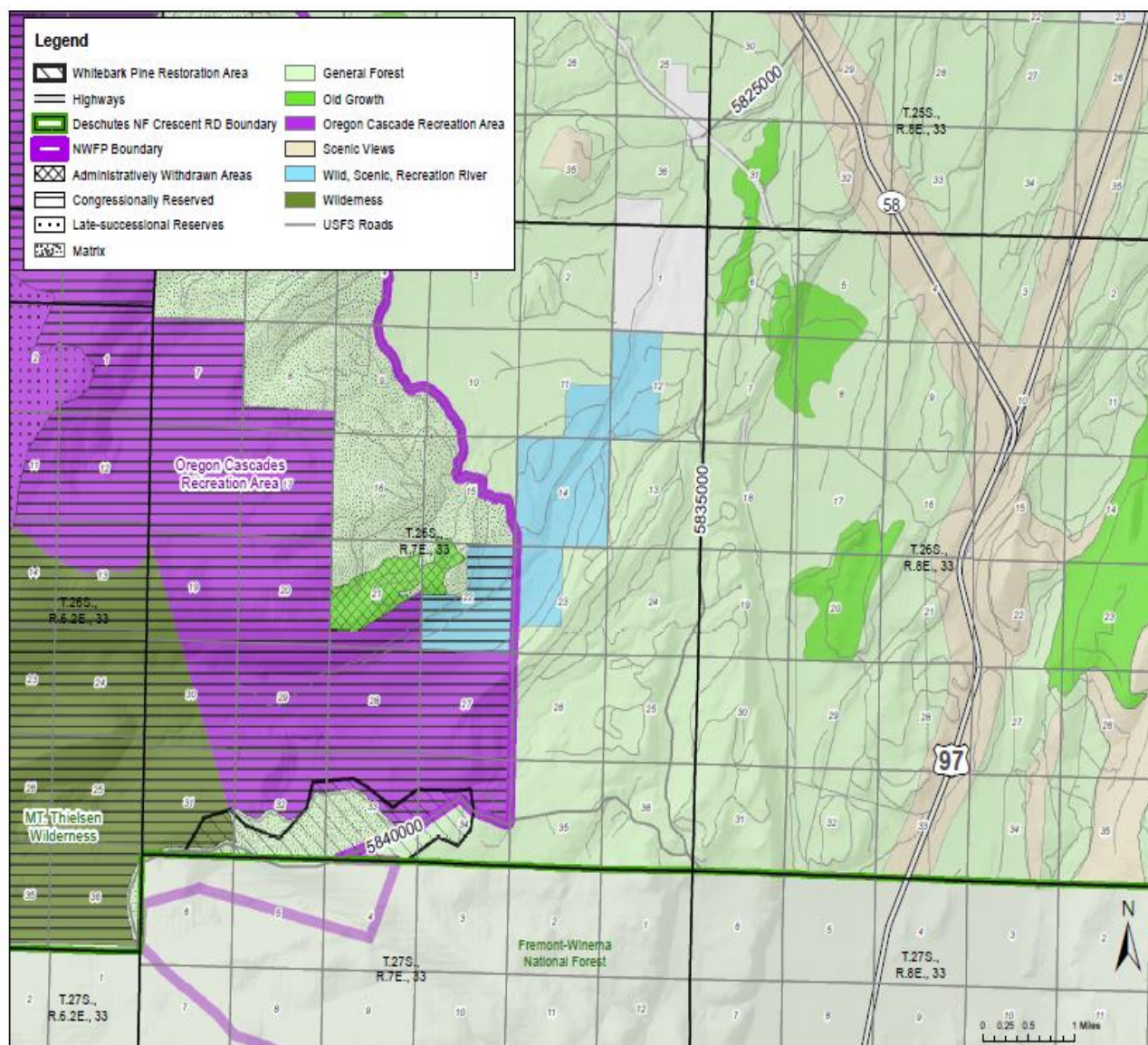


Figure 1 – Proposed Whitebark Pine Restoration Area